English Corner and EFL Extracurricular Writing

By Ingrid Wisniewska

English is learned as a foreign language (EFL) in China. For decades, the teaching of writing at the tertiary level has been product-centered. The emphasis is on "style, organization, and correctness" (Hairston 1982). Writing topics are assigned by teachers and the composing process is linear. Although teachers "complain and brag about how much time they spend meticulously marking each paper," they feel frustrated to see that "many of their students improve so little despite their time and effort (Hairston 1982)." The situation is quite similar in my college. The writing course is run in the second year for both two-year and four-year English majors. Every time the writing teacher assigns a topic, students shout, showing anxiety and dissatisfaction. They complain that they learn no "real things" in the writing class because isolated skills taught cannot help them write fluently and communicate effectively. They "don't feel like writing anything demanded by teachers."

Shocked by the students' complaints, a writing research group (WRG) was formed to launch an extracurricular writing program in 1993. Among the writing activities of the program, English corner writing is the most popular with the students. This article discusses how English corner activities (ECA) can help students write successfully.

What's a College English Corner?

A college English corner is any "corner" (appropriate place) on a university campus for students to practise their oral English in their spare time. English corners began to be popular in the early 1980s in China because they provided an English-speaking environment to reinforce the oral skills learned in class. Today, English corners exist in all universities in China, but with its function limited to only oral practice.

When we searched for methods to get students to write, we asked ourselves and students the question: "Why don't we put writing into the corner activities? Students enjoy talking and talking can motivate them to read and write!" With this common understanding of teachers and students, WRG decided to invite students to write in the series of the English corner activities. The innovation has proved successful, not only in helping students write but also, unexpectedly, helping them listen better, speak better, and read better.

Procedures

General instruction. There are 16 classes ranging from grades 1 to 4 in the English Department, with 35 to 40 students in each class. ECA is held once a week on a certain day from 6:00 to 7:30

p.m., either in the open air (open to all English majors and English learners within and outside the college, called Open ECA) or in the classroom (involves only one class called Class ECA). The Open ECA and Class ECA are run respectively in odd-numbered and even-numbered weeks. If the Open ECA happens in the first academic week, the Class ECA follows in the second academic week. There are 20 odd-numbered weeks in an academic year, so every class leads the Open ECA at least once a year. Teachers of the English Department take turns joining the Open ECA, and the head teacher of each class is required to join the Class ECA. ECA is conducted around themes. WRG gives a long list of themes and related topics at the beginning of a semester, but students have the freedom to choose their own and they are encouraged to do so.

Stage 1: Preparing topics for Open ECA. The responsible class holds a discussion to choose a theme around which different topics and interesting ideas and opinions are generated. Each student is required to find at least one theme-related topic under which people's perspectives and the student's personal opinion are given. The student can discuss with classmates and/or go to the library to explore the facts, ideas, and perspectives in books, magazines, and newspapers. The student should provide relevant materials, as authentic as possible, to be read to participants during the Open ECA. To prevent understanding problems, a list of related vocabulary is provided by the students from the responsible class. That list is derived from each student's contributions, authentic materials, and dictionaries. Then each student writes down or types the topics, perspectives, and vocabulary on a piece of paper and makes copies to be distributed later. The responsible class should make the chosen theme public several days before the Open ECA by putting a notice on a campus board or broadcasting the news (all in English) over the college's News Broadcasting Station.

Stage 2: Conducting Open ECA. Students of the responsible class come to the site of the *OPEN ECA* a little earlier than other participants, with the prepared materials in hand to guide the formation of groups. When groups are formed, these group leaders trigger discussions on the prepared topics. During the interaction they listen attentively to the participants and argue enthusiastically with them. Authentic and prepared materials help all the participants carry on the talk when they sometimes feel there is nothing to say. When people from outside of the college join a group, they often add real life experiences and professional knowledge into the discussion and make it livelier. Teachers move around the groups, asking questions and helping students solve some problems.

Stage 3: Reading and writing independently. After the Open ECA, students' schemata ("previously acquired background knowledge structures," Carrel et al. 1983:556) are activated. They are now encouraged to read widely to adjust and expand their schemata because we hold the notion that "students' prior knowledge will influence your own. This is why reading is such a powerful prewriting strategy" (Elder 1990:61). We let students read and write independently because we believe that, first, students need to learn independently for some time; and second, students have different learning styles-some enjoy learning collaboratively, some independently. As we learn from experience, we should keep a balance. Writers in this stage have the complete freedom in choosing writing topics and can engage in descriptive, narrative, expository, or argumentative writing, based on the requirements of the topics. They often write in response to an issue in Open ECA for the class publication. Because initial writing needs to be revised, we advise students to leave a big margin (one-third or half of a page's width) so that they can add

examples or move paragraphs around later without having to copy over the portions they like or think important. Students usually have no difficulty in producing a draft of several pages within this stage because they have the motivation to put their ideas on paper and they don't have to worry so much about form and grades.

Stage 4: Peer editing (Class ECA). The whole class breaks into small groups, each consisting of four students. Within a group, everyone is both writer and editor. Before peer editing, the relationship between the writer and the editor is specified by the teacher as follows:

1. The editor's job is only to make suggestions on improvement. The writer should decide which of the editor's suggestions are useful.
2. The editor's comments should be as specific as possible.
3. The writer should not be defensive when hearing advice from the editor. He should write down some of the editor's comments.
4. The writer should not change a draft right after receiving suggestions from the editor. The writer needs to think before making any changes.

To involve writers in the communication of meaning, some basic questions concerned with their writing are given to the editors to ask:

1. What's the focus of the writing?
2. What does the writer want to achieve by writing this essay?
3. Who is the intended audience ?
4. Are all the sentences and paragraphs relevant?
5. Are the ideas expressed clearly? Are the supportive details effective?
6. Is the text well organized?

At the end of the peer editing, the teacher can give direct instruction in discourse structures and help students with grammar and vocabulary.

Stage 5: Revising further and publishing. With the feedback in Stage 4, writers further revise their drafts to their satisfaction and submit them to the "class publication centers" (Goodman 1986:33) for publication. Submission is voluntary and publication is monthly. Students take turns being the chief editors while WRG and the head teachers are ready to help whenever it is necessary. We have 16 class publishing centers, so we have 16 "student-authored books" (Goodman 1986:33) each month. Students own these collections and are able to share them.

Comments

The biggest problem with EFL writing (e.g., in China) is that students don't want to write and write too little. The underlying reasons according to our investigations are: 1.) teachers have too much control of students' writing; 2.) writing focuses on form rather than the communication of meaning; 3.) writing is isolated from other language skills (listening, speaking, and reading); 4.) there is very little social interaction.

Different from the traditional approach to the teaching of writing, the extracurricular writing program discussed in this article involves students in writing across activities and in "using it (language) functionally and purposefully to meet their own needs" (Goodman 1986:7). Students choose the topics interesting and relevant to them. They are invited but not forced to write. Writing focuses on the communication of meaning rather than form. Through the five stages, "teachers guide, support, monitor, encourage, and facilitate learning, but do not control it" (Goodman 1986:29). Although the writing program emphasizes writing, the four language modalities are never separated but integrated. This makes learners listen better, speak better, read better, and write better. Goodman (1986:31) explains, "If language is learned best and easiest when it is whole and in a natural context, then integration is a key principle for language development and learning through language."

EFL reading and writing have always been isolated from each other in the Chinese classroom. They are taught as separate courses. If students are poor in reading, only the reading teacher is to be blamed; if students don't write well, it is the writing teacher who should exclusively bear the responsibility. This is quite unfair for the reading and writing teachers. The basic principle of the English corner writing is consistent with the theory of the reading-writing connection (Reid 1993). As reading and writing support each other (Morrow et al. 1994; Reid 1993), students are encouraged to talk to read, to read to write, and to write to rewrite. They read critically and write critically.

Class publications give writers a sense of ownership. As the cycle of ECA runs on, writers create a great amount of writing, which can be shared among themselves and the students of later grades. This "good tradition," as my colleagues and I call it, not only enhances students' writing but also promotes classroom research and teaching, because "teachers become aware of common interests among groups of students, and this awareness allows them to plan future group activities" (Johnson et al. 1989:179).

As of the writing of this article, the writing course is still conducted in much the same way as before in my college; but by having fully involved students in this extracurricular program, students are able to understand and draw some ideas from the product-centered course when they write-that is, "the dull one makes some sense!" Readers of this paper may wonder why we shouldn't change the whole writing course, but that is another question for another article.

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